

# Vanishing Culture: Cultural Preservation and Queer History

by Brooke Palmieri

As a writer and artist that draws on the long history of gender nonconformity in my work, a driving force behind my practice is the idea that a longing for history will always be a fundamental aspect of humanity, so long as memory itself serves as a foundation for human consciousness. Everyone has a history, but the majority of people are not taught how to look back in order to find it. One problem is the depth and breadth of our losses. People and their prized possessions are destroyed by accident and by design throughout history: armed conflict, invasion, willful destruction, natural disaster, decay. Then there is the fantasy of destruction, a destructive force in its own right, the perception that nothing survives. *That* fantasy begets a reality of its own: because I don't go looking for what survives, I don't find it, or I don't recognize it when I see it. This is true across subcultures and among historically marginalized or oppressed groups, and for the queer and trans subjects whose histories I am interested in recovering in particular. In the twenty-first century, access to queer and trans history is an accident of birth: knowing someone in your family or neighborhood, living in a place where it isn't legislated against, going to a school that dares teach it, affording admission into one of the universities that offers classes on it.

My research process tends to triangulate between the archive of my own weird and imperfect human experiences and the debris I collect around them, small collections amassed by and for queer and trans people, and larger institutions that also contain relevant material that begs to be recontextualized. Or to make it personal: to write my upcoming book *Bargain Witch: Essays in Self Initiation*, I used my journals and the [Wayback Machine](#) to look at old websites I'd made when I was 14, the archive of the [William Way LGBT center](#) in Philadelphia where I grew up, and special collections at major institutions like the [Fales Library at NYU](#), the [Digital Transgender Archive](#) at Northwestern University, and the [British Library](#) in London. All my adult life I've made pilgrimage between the intimate domestic spaces where people preserve their own histories, to local collections set up on shoestring budgets as a labor of love, to the vast, climate-controlled repositories of state and higher education that have more recently begun to preserve our histories, each enhancing what it is possible for me to know, delight in, or mourn, about where I have come from, the forebears by blood and by choice that imbue my life with its many possibilities.

It's a creative act to find and make sense of my own history, one that requires a leap of faith in order to fill in the silences, erasures, omissions, and genuine mysteries that old books and documents, records and artifacts, represent. A lot is left to the imagination. Much of what survives from the past asks more questions than we can answer. This is true for queer and trans

archival traces, as it is for other aspects of humanity that are poorly accounted for in public records, or actively discriminated against through surveillance and omission in equal parts.

Classically, archives are brutal, desolate places to find humanity; they were never meant to record the nuances of flesh and blood existence so much as they originate as a way governments keep track of their resources. It has taken millennia for us to conceive of records as places where humanity might be honored rather than betrayed. This is an epic change: I am in awe of the fact that I live in a time where the heft of documentary history—clay, parchment, paper, and now pixel—is shifting paradigms from records kept by anonymous paid laborers to flatten life into statistics, to records kept by people who dare to name themselves and their subjectivity, who collect something of themselves and their obsessions, for other kindred spirits to find. From archives as places meant to consolidate power, to places containing mess and sprawl, places for heated encounters.

In the past few decades of “living with the internet” these places and encounters have multiplied exponentially, as queer and trans subcultures have relied on message boards, blogs, and personal websites to share information. I personally relied (and still rely on) on reddit, and the classic, Hudson’s FTM Resource Guide ([www.ftmguide.org](http://www.ftmguide.org)), and TopSurgery.Net to navigate the healthcare system in both the UK and USA in order to access hormones and surgery—part of a much longer tradition of “the Transgender Internet” that Avery Dame-Griff chronicles in his book *The Two Revolutions* (2023). To say nothing of AOL in the early 2000s, the culture on [Tumblr in the early-to-mid 2010s](#) and printed publications like *Original Plumbing* and archived copies of the *FTM Newsletter*. Digital environments informed me of physical places, and vice versa, and each expanded and embellished my appreciation of the other. From reading books and trawling the internet, I knew places like San Francisco, New York, London, and Berlin would be where I could find other trans people. When I moved to London, I knew to go to [Gay’s the Word](#), a queer bookshop that first opened in 1979, to make friends, and eventually, to get a job. When I started my own queer book club, or wanted to find zine fairs or club nights, I often found information about them on tumblr or instagram. When traveling to new cities, a gay friend tipped me off that any place recommended by [BUTT Magazine](#) would show me a good time.

But in my queer and trans context, both digital and paper-based archives and libraries are often labors of love, made from scratch, published with a “by us for us” ethos that is under-resourced and so always in danger of disappearing. Most queer publishing from the 1960s onward was issued in small, independent presses that have disappeared. An interesting model for documenting this is the British Library’s [Endangered Archives Programme](#), where resources and expertise is shared to catalog and digitize collections materials in a centrally kept database. This is mutually beneficial to the places where the materials are kept—accurate cataloging is crucial to using and developing any archive—as well as to interested audiences further afield. And this feels also like a pragmatic approach to the reality of loss: we might not be able to predict what will survive over time, but keeping abundant records in multiple locations of what has existed will at least allow us to mourn our losses.

A culmination of my interests in hunting and gathering queer history is my imprint and traveling installation: CAMP BOOKS. I started CAMP BOOKS in 2018 as a way to highlight the places I'd most enjoyed meeting queer and trans people—independent bookshops, which have a rich, radical history throughout subculture—and as a way to keep the focus on making and distributing publications about the obscure histories I was unearthing in my research. Before libraries sought to cater to an LGBTQIA+ readership, specialist bookshops like the [Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop](#), [Giovanni's Room](#), and Gay's the Word were the only places you could find concentrations of queer, feminist books with positive portrayals of queer lives. These shops were hubs of culture: places where community events were held and publicized, activists groups were able to meet, and friendship and romance could blossom in broad daylight. CAMP BOOKS sets up pop-up bookshops, tables at art and zine fairs, and also builds installations in galleries and community spaces to continue this tradition. I also sell rare books and ephemera related to queer history through CAMP BOOKS in order to fund our efforts, including new publications, zines, and posters related to queer and trans history. The CAMP BOOKS motto is: "Queer Past Nourish Queer Futures," and this extends to our model of generating funds from past efforts to fund new writing and work. I also believe this logic can extend to anyone: preserving what interests you about the past brings a particular pleasure of connection into the present. Most of the people I have loved in my life, I have met and known through shared obsessions with the past, and it has brought a lot of pleasure and adventure into my life.

An abiding concern I have had about cultural preservation—in my case, subcultural preservation, because the people I love across time existed in a myriad of DIY subcultures that often cross-pollinated art, music, and literary influences—and have heard from others, revolves around the question of inheritance and access. You can inherit books and papers, art and artifacts, but you can't inherit e-books, and born digital archives require specialist care and technology. My hope is that this divide is bridged by reconsidering the nature of inheritance itself: rather than an individual's gain, queer and trans history is something that we are all heir to, and can all benefit from accessing. Large institutions, and large digital repositories in particular, play a crucial role in rewriting the meaning of inheritance by offering freely accessible, and accurately cataloged, information. But ultimately, archives that document human experience begin at home, and rely on people whose love for their lives, their friends, and their scenes inspire them to save posters, photographs, and other receipts—online and offline—that document their experiences. I hope after reading this, you start saving something of your life now.

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This essay is part of the Internet Archive's [Vanishing Culture](#) series, highlighting the power and importance of preservation in our digital age.